

SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE: PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, AND CRISIS RESPONSE

Two days after the end of the school year, days that normally would be spent catching up on activities and rest foregone during the year, a group of school employees from a large North Carolina school district met to begin planning for the unthinkable. The unthinkable to them is a “Columbine-like” incident; the task at hand was to plan for the response that might be needed should such an incident ever occur.

School counselors comprised the majority of attendees at this meeting. Their specific task over the summer was to outline the roles they as counselors need to fulfill should a violent incident take place. Many individuals in a school, school district, and community have roles to fill should such an incident occur, but increasingly school counselors are being turned to by those who are grappling with increased concerns about violence which invades the school house. Counselors are seen as contributors to the spectrum of effort which defines how school violence is being addressed. Counselors are viewed as vital resources to tap into to prevent violent incidents from happening, to intervene when concerns arise that the potential for violence exists, and to respond when violence occurs.

School Violence

Before focusing on the increased attention being given to counselors, providing an understanding of what it is they are being asked to address is essential. “School violence” needs to be understood as more than the “Columbine-like” incident. School violence is “any behavior that violates a school’s educational mission or climate of respect or jeopardizes the intent of the school to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, disruptions, and disorder” (Center for the Prevention of School Violence, 2000, p. 2). It exists along a continuum which begins on one end with behaviors such as put downs and trash talking and culminates on the other end with the multiple murder incidents which grab everyone’s attention.

While attention to and concerns about school violence have increased in recent years,

school violence as reflected by the types of discipline and criminal incidents that are reported and tracked is not on the rise but, in fact, has been at least occurring at somewhat constant rates and has even decreased in some categories. The following statistics illustrate this reality:

- most injuries which occur at school are not the result of violence;
- students ages 12 through 18 are more likely to be victims of serious violent crimes away from school than at school;
- the overall school crime rate between 1993 and 1997 declined, from about 155 school-related crimes for every 1,000 students ages 12 to 18 in 1993, to about 102 such crimes in 1997; and
- fewer students are carrying weapons and engaging in physical fights on school grounds (US Departments of Education and Justice, 1999).

Experts consistently emphasize that schools are the safest places children and youth spend time on a day-to-day basis. The odds of a student being killed in an incident such as the ones we have experienced are said to be one-in-a-million (US Department of Education, 1999).

School Violence Prevention Resource: School Counselors

Yet, even with these odds, concerns are on the increase, and more actions are now being taken to address school violence. For many who are working in this arena, school counselors are perceived as logical resources to access given their training and the roles they ideally fulfill in the schools in which they work. A sampling of recommendations by high-level task forces across the country reflect how counselors are viewed:

- Louisiana’s Statewide Safe Schools Task Force requested that specific actions be taken to place higher priority on counseling services (Louisiana Department of Education, 1998);
- New York’s Task Force on School Violence recommended that school counselors participate in the development of “strategies to involve parents in their children’s development and to include parents in counseling sessions to increase communication and foster shared decision-making” (New York Task Force on

School Violence, 1999, p. 44);

- Massachusetts’s Task Force included counselors in the list of those who should receive enhanced training on how to respond to violent youth (Governor’s Advisory Council on Youth Violence, 1999);
- North Carolina’s Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety called for additional study of the counselor role to determine how direct contact with students could be enhanced (Governor’s Task Force on Youth Violence and School Safety, 1999); and
- South Carolina’s Safe Schools Task Force called for a reduction in the student-counselor ratio at all grade levels and a redefining of role and job responsibilities so that counselors are able “to counsel and work directly with students” (South Carolina’s Safe Schools Task Force, 1999, p. 12).

Legislative bodies at both the state and federal levels have also been active with regard to school counselors. In light of concerns about school violence, California’s 1999-2000 legislature passed a law adding more school counselors (California Office of Criminal Justice Planning, 2000). In addition, the federal government’s involvement includes a funding opportunity specifically directed at increasing the number of elementary school counselors given that such counselors “can contribute to the personal growth, educational development, and emotional well-being of elementary and secondary school children by providing professional counseling, intervention, and referral services (United States Senate, 1999, p. 2).

School Counselors and School Violence

A logical question to pose at this time involves what school counselors can actually do about school violence. School counselor advocacy groups have attempted to answer this in a number of ways -- from active participation on school violence task forces such as those previously named to lobbying legislative bodies. Common themes emerge from these efforts including concerns over student-counselor ratios that across the country do not meet the American School Counselor Association’s suggested one counselor for every 250 students

(American School Counselor Association, 1999); concerns over the nature of the counselor's job which is often described as more "paper pusher" than counseling provider; and articulation of the school counselor's potential contributions to efforts directed at addressing school violence in all of its manifestations.

The Idaho School Counselor Association has identified school counselor's contributions to safe schools with reference to students, parents, teachers/school/school district, and the community. With students, counselors are to:

- provide group and individual counseling dealing with academic, career, personal, and social needs;
- coordinate mentor programs available to all students to assist with academic and peer concerns;
- facilitate programs (e.g., conflict resolution, peer mediation, and anger management) that train students how to handle their anger and peer problems; and
- conduct regular discussion groups on school district's code of student behavior and discipline (Idaho School Counselor Association, 1999).

Regarding parents, counselors are to:

- provide resources and training on disciplining children nonviolently and working with strong-willed children; and
- have a referral system for those who seek help with their children's behavior (Idaho School Counselor Association, 1999).

With teachers/school/school district, counselors are to:

- assist teachers and all staff with training needs in student behavior and discipline;
- coordinate a school-wide program that promotes no tolerance for fighting, bullying, harassing, discriminating, or other unsafe, inequitable behaviors;
- team with other student services' staff to develop an effective system of referral and assessment for students exhibiting troublesome behaviors;
- assist with the school's required data collection for the Safe and Drug-Free

Schools program; and

- serve on the school and district crisis response teams (Idaho School Counselor Association, 1999).

With the community, counselors are to:

- work with local children/youth advocate groups, especially those that address child abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence issues; and
- help create policies and programs that demonstrate a community that cares about its children (Idaho School Counselor Association, 1999).

Beyond the specific contributions related to the various stakeholders which characterize this issue is the broader spectrum of effort which defines how school violence is being addressed. With this approach, counselors are seen as resources for prevention, intervention, and crisis response.

Counselors as Prevention Resources

In an effort to enhance the capacity of schools and communities to address increasing concerns about school violence, the United States Department of Education has produced over the last three years two documents, *Early Warning - Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* and *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*. Both of these documents emphasize the importance of comprehensive approaches to making schools safer. Comprehensiveness in this instance means approaching school violence in terms of preventing undesirable incidents from occurring, intervening when the likelihood of such incidents is evidenced, and responding when such incidents happen.

Preventing the undesirable requires a whole-school perspective, and counselors by nature of their role bring this perspective into the arena of school violence prevention. As defined by the American School Counselor Association (1999), “the professional school counselor is a certified/licensed educator who addresses the needs of students comprehensively through the implementation of a developmental school counseling program” (p.1). Such a programmatic emphasis at the building level enables the school to build the type of “schoolwide foundation” that is identified by the US Department of Education as being the support structure needed to pursue

prevention efforts. This foundation needs to support positive discipline, academic success, and mental and emotional wellness by providing a caring environment in which appropriate behavior and academic instruction are provided (US Department of Education, 2000).

In an ideal school world in which paperwork is minimal and time is infinite, counselors can be involved in all of these facets of this foundation. In the real world, they must do what most must do - determine what is most needed and apply their skills and training in such a way as to prevent the undesirable from happening. What this means for school counselors is that they need to assess their schools to determine both strengths and needs. In the best circumstances, the entire school community undertakes such an assessment and then uses the information generated from it to determine strategies, roles, and responsibilities, including the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor. Within this assessment framework, school counselors are often called upon to provide input or even make decisions about the types of prevention programs that schools should implement. In communicating with school counselors located throughout the United States, the Center for the Prevention of School Violence sees counselors attempting to be prevention oriented by being members of school-based teams, working closely with the increasing numbers of law enforcement officers being assigned to provide services to schools, and expending energy and enthusiasm in efforts which are intended to develop relationships with students.

Given that school counselors are argued to be “specialists in human behavior” by the American School Counselor Association (1999), it is not surprising that counselors are often tapped on the shoulder to work on the many school-based teams that exist in schools throughout the country. In the arena of school violence alone, these teams range from those that are involved in safe school planning, to student assistance teams which are often charged with intervening when problems surface, to crisis response teams. The expectation of the counselor’s performance on these teams varies from being a consultant to the team to being a coordinator of the team’s work.

Counselors working with law enforcement in schools can offer great potential for prevention efforts to be pursued. One of the areas of concern in the arena of counseling is the

lack of time counselors are able to spend with students—even in informal encounters in school hallways. The assignment of specially trained law enforcement officers such as School Resource Officers (SROs) to schools has provided an additional resource for the counselor in this regard. SROs spend a majority of their time interacting with students in some way. Most SROs are trained in an approach which emphasizes that they can assist school staff, including counselors, in identifying those students most in need of attention and assistance. In the best situations, SROs and counselors work together with SROs serving as an extra set of eyes and ears for the counselor and working as a conduit of information to the counselor so that the students who need the counselors the most are given the opportunity for assistance.

The third aspect of a prevention orientation that the Center for the Prevention of School Violence has identified is that counselors across the United States are making considerable effort to develop relationships with students. Most “school people” agree that if every student had a caring adult in the school house, most problems would be prevented. The difficulty with this is, of course, that the school houses are sometimes so large and the students so many. Involvement by counselors in activities that promote student involvement in school safety becomes essential.

One student involvement approach, according the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, that is seeing increasing numbers of students at all levels is Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.). Initially established by students who lost a classmate in a violent shooting, S.A.V.E. is a curricular approach which can be classroom or whole-school applied at the elementary level and is an extra-curricular approach at the middle/junior high and high school levels. Often school counselors serve as advisors to S.A.V.E. Through S.A.V.E., messages about the appropriate ways to handle conflict and anger can be conveyed, students can gain a sense of ownership of the safety of their schools, and, most importantly, the development of caring relationships between and among adults and students can occur. Counselors are vital in such prevention strategies.

Counselors as Intervention Resources

In the United States Department of Education’s *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action*

Guide (2000), intervention is segmented into intervention which takes place early and intervention which must be intensive. School counselors are important contributors to both types of intervention strategies and, as with prevention, are often turned to for input and decisions.

Early interventions in the arena of school violence have been defined in the last few years with reference to early warning signs. Such signs are said to serve as possible indicators of problems for students who manifest them. The best approaches to interventions based upon the early warning signs approach emphasize that such signs must be understood in terms of both environmental and developmental contexts, typically occur in conjunction with other signs, can be identified as changes or departures from expected behaviors, are not “predictors” of inappropriate behaviors, and must be addressed with a “do no harm” philosophy (US Department of Education, 1997). The nature of this approach lends itself to school counselors as they typically are seen as having the training needed to identify the signs, are turned to in many schools to assist others with learning the signs, and are involved with developing and implementing interventions should signs be exhibited and interventions be warranted.

In some schools, counselors are the entire intervention system; in others, they serve on some form of student assistance/support teams. In these latter situations, teams are activated when warning signs trigger a referral. The counselor with other school staff evaluate the situation and develop intervention strategies which can range from conferencing with the student to referring the student to additional mental health services provided by school psychologists or other mental health professionals.

An important component of this type of intervention involves working with parents. Just as the Idaho School Counselor Association (1999) implies, counselors need to view parents as stakeholders and must provide services and resources to them when appropriate. In terms of intervention, this may mean counseling the student and the parent together and working with both to address the signs that have been manifested. Developing a plan to address the signs, assisting with implementation through consultation and monitoring, and assessing the plan’s impact may all be the responsibility of the school counselor.

Additionally, programmatic interventions that address groups of students and even entire schools may fall to the school counselor. A good example of these types of interventions is the peer mediation program. Many schools implement such programs which involve students serving as mediators of peer conflict. Such an intervention strategy can be particularly useful if such conflict characterizes school-house relationships. School counselors often oversee the implementation of these programs and are involved in training students to be peer mediators, managing the referral process to peer mediation, and monitoring mediation results.

When such school-house intervention approaches do not adequately meet the needs of individual students who may be experiencing difficulties, more intensive intervention becomes necessary. Some 3 to 10 percent of students may be in need of such intervention (US Department of Education, 2000). With such intervention, school counselors combine their efforts with other mental health professionals in the school, school district, and sometimes the community to try to address the needs of the individual student and the student's family.

Counselors as Crisis Resources

Crises of all sorts impact schools, but the spotlight these days in crisis planning is the "school violence" crisis. Thoughts of such a crisis taking place are what prompted the meeting described at the beginning of this article. School counselors across the country are being included on crisis teams which range from those that plan for the managing of the school violence crisis to those that are actively involved in recovering from such a crisis.

The role of the school counselor in these efforts stems from the training and skills they are expected to have in the capacities in which they service their schools. Such training and skills have been delineated by the American School Counselor Association (1999) as counseling, large group guidance, consulting, and coordinating.

Some specific understanding of the counselor's role on the crisis team can be garnered by examining how the role is described in a school district crisis response plan. In Cumberland County, North Carolina, the school district's *Crisis Management and Emergency Handbook* notes the counselor is to:

- provide counseling for students;
- plan logistics for counseling;
- coordinate all counseling activities;
- communicate with faculty;
- cancel scheduled activities;
- seek additional counseling support;
- contact feeder schools;
- seek additional secretarial support; and
- provide information to parents (Cumberland County North Carolina Schools, 1998).

Once the crisis incident has been responded to and “crisis management” with reference to the incident is over, recovery from the crisis or “postvention” commences, and counselors again must see to the needs of their schools. Both whole-school and individual needs must be met. If necessary, school counselors coordinate efforts with specially trained grief counselors and others who may be assigned to the school to assist in recovery. School counselors also may be involved in debriefing students and staff as well as providing support groups and healing activities. Important for counselors to remember in these efforts is that parents be kept informed of student well being and that parental permission for assistance is obtained when necessary. Also important is that counselors remember they themselves are part of the school community that has been impacted by the crisis and that they must take care of themselves when crisis strikes.

Conclusion

The contributions school counselors can make to prevention, intervention, and crisis response efforts strongly play into arguments that sometimes must be made in the advocacy of school counseling programs and positions. With increased concerns about school violence comes some new opportunity for counselors to contribute to their school communities in obviously meaningful ways. Important to not lose sight of with this new opportunity is that these counselors be adequately prepared for what this new opportunity requires of them. Understanding how counselors play roles in prevention, intervention, and crisis response lends

itself to the development of training that will ensure that counselors will be equipped to handle what is asked of them and what they have the opportunity to contribute.

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